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UMaine study explores diversity and equity practices in higher education faculty searches

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Like many parts of society, higher education has grappled recently with the historic marginalization of and inequities between different groups. One way this has played out is through an increasing focus on diversity and equity in faculty hiring practices.

A recent journal article from two University of Maine researchers suggests that despite good intentions, implicit and overt bias, as well as institutional and structural barriers, may still hamper colleges' and universities' efforts to diversify their faculty ranks. The study's authors — associate professor of higher education Leah Hakkola and doctoral student in higher education Sarah Dyer — explored the role of faculty search chairs' status and social identities in search committee dynamics and decisions about hiring diverse candidates.

Through in-depth interviews with nearly 20 faculty search committee chairs at one university, Hakkola and Dyer sought to understand how chairs interpret diversity and equity, how they implement equitable hiring practices, and how faculty hierarchy influences search processes.

"A disconnect arose between how individuals discussed their understanding of diversity and how it was perceived as an institutional value in the search process," Hakkola and Dyer write.

"Specifically, participants' own understanding of diversity imbued how they talked about it in the search process," they say. "Yet, when asked how institutional actors such as administrators, [human resources] and [equal opportunity] talked about diversity related to the search, race, ethnicity and gender were most often cited as important."

The search chairs interviewed by Hakkola and Dyer rarely mentioned race when asked to reflect on how their own identities influenced their understanding of diversity. Instead, they were more likely to bring up gender, religion, nationality or field of study. Those who felt it was important to center race came from social backgrounds with a lot of racial diversity.

Overall, Hakkola and Dyer say that in interviews "faculty drew from personal narratives and institutional factors to inform the ways in which they conceptualized diversity and equity during their searches."

Most participants felt that HR and EO departments were responsible for making sure searches were equitable and inclusive. However, a common theme in interviews was the lack of information and clarity from those departments when it came to the search chair's role. Some chairs said they had no training on how to center diversity and equity, while others received very little.

"Ultimately a clear breakdown emerged in communication and expectations between institutional role senders and the search chair role," Hakkola and Dyer say.

Despite the lack of guidance, some chairs felt a need to address implicit and overt bias in their searches. However, one significant finding was that faculty rank influenced diversity and equity decisions made by search committees. Hakkola and Dyer say junior faculty members who served as chairs — those who had yet to receive tenure — felt less comfortable exercising agency or discretion than senior faculty members.

"Based on these findings, it was clear that faculty status affected equitable hiring practices," they write. "Specifically, if a senior faculty search chair valued diversity as an asset, the search was conducted with equity and diversity in mind. Alternatively, if the senior faculty search chair did not see the value in centering diversity or equity in the search, the likelihood of bias influencing decisions increased."

Although the study sheds light on roles, conduct, and responsibilities of faculty search chairs in higher education, Hakkola and Dyer say further research is needed to better understand the issues involved in centering diversity and equity in hiring decisions. That includes examining different types of institutions to see how their particular power dynamics impact search committee decisions.

The article, "Role Conflict: How Search Committee Chairs Negotiate Faculty Status, Diversity, and Equity in Faculty Searches," was published in the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.

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